



Russian Military Mobilization on Ukraine's Borders and in Occupied Crimea

April 27, 2021

In March 2021, Russia began massing troops on the Ukrainian border and in Ukraine's occupied Crimea region. Observers have disagreed about whether Russia is preparing for a future invasion or engaging in coercive signaling. Russia continued to build up its forces in April, dismissing concerns and stating that it was conducting military exercises. On April 22, Russia **announced** that most units would return to their permanent bases but some would remain deployed through upcoming exercises in September. Which units will remain and which will return to their bases remains to be seen. Congress has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and for deterring Russian aggression.

Russian Troop Deployments

Despite a **cease-fire** negotiated in July 2020, fighting between Ukrainian armed forces and Russia-led rebel fighters in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine has **increased** since February 2021. Both sides have **reported** increased casualties and cease-fire violations, including the use of heavy artillery. International monitors have reported numerous cease-fire violations, **denial of passage** along the contact line, and **electronic interference** with unmanned aerial vehicles used to monitor the cease-fire.

As tensions increased, Russia began conducting military exercises on Ukraine's border and in Ukraine's occupied Crimea region in March 2021. At the same time, Russia accused Ukraine of preparing an offensive to retake separatist regions in the Donbas, without offering evidence of such a buildup. Russia increased its military posture in Crimea, where airborne troops **conducted drills**, and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced plans to relocate Russia's 56th Air Assault Brigade to Feodosia, Crimea. Russia conducted additional exercises on the Ukrainian border, and **reports** indicated that Russian troops failed to return to their bases after exercises concluded. This amassing **caused significant concern** in Ukraine and among Western governments, with U.S. European Command raising its **watch level** to "potential imminent crisis." In March and April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley held calls with their Ukrainian counterparts. **President Biden** held a call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 2.

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IN11651

Figure I. Russia-Ukraine Border

Source: Congressional Research Service.

[composition of forces](#) raised [concerns](#), as did reports of heavy artillery, tanks, electronic warfare assets, and combat aircraft moving toward the Ukrainian border, as well as 9K720 [Iskander](#) short-range ballistic missiles. [Satellite imagery and media reporting](#) focused primarily on the Pogonovo training area, outside Voronezh on the Ukrainian border, and other units were identified in Crimea, including at the Opuk training range. More recently, Russia moved [significant naval forces](#), including landing ships, and air assets to conduct exercises in [Crimea](#).

[U.S. officials estimated](#) that the size of Russian troops deployed near Ukraine and in Crimea exceeded the number that forcibly occupied Crimea in 2014. Recently, [EU officials](#) estimated that Russia had more than 100,000 troops deployed, and Ukrainian authorities [stated](#) that they expected Russian forces to approach 120,000 by the end of April—although these estimates were made before Moscow announced that military units would return to their bases.

Some analysts [note](#) that Russia's military posture does not appear poised to launch an offensive. Most forces are based outside Voronezh and would require time to mobilize for operations. Moving troops closer to the border would provide an indication of a possible invasion. Additionally, analysts have [noted](#) the limited presence of logistics and support capabilities, with many skeptical there was sufficient support for offensive operations.

Possible Russian Intentions

Russia's intentions behind its troop movements remain [unclear](#). Two possible ambitious goals include seizing Ukrainian territory north of Crimea to solve Crimea's water crisis or introducing more Russian troops into eastern Ukraine and formally annexing the region. Both options would entail significant forces, however, and likely would result in large casualties.

Many observers argue that rather than planning for these goals, Russia is [engaging](#) in some form of [coercive](#) signaling. The buildup was [public](#), with little effort to hide troops and equipment moving towards Ukraine. It also was gradual, increasing over several weeks. It is [unclear](#) if Russia was signaling to Ukraine to restart Minsk negotiations regarding eastern Ukraine, warning the new Biden Administration and Western audiences of the potential consequences of policies the Kremlin views as anti-Russian, distracting from domestic controversies such as the imprisonment of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny, or [all the above](#).

At the same time, observers expressed concerns that movement of new units and equipment to the border was a possible indication of offensive intent. Since 2015, Russia has [reformed and bolstered](#) its force posture on the Ukrainian border, partly to deter any future Ukrainian military offensive. On April 14,

In April 2021, Russia continued to move military forces both on Ukraine's border and in Crimea. Social media, open sources, and media reports [documented](#) troops moving toward the Ukrainian border and Crimea from Russia's Southern and Central Military Districts. Russia [reported](#) conducting further military exercises. Russia's military buildup, however, exceeded its [reported](#) exercises, and justifications came only after Ukraine and Western governments expressed concern. On April 13, Defense Minister Shoigu stated that Russia had redeployed units from [two armies and three airborne units](#) to its western border as part of a readiness exercise.

In addition to the size of the buildup, the

Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns [stated](#) to the Senate Intelligence Committee that the “buildup has reached the point where ... it also could provide the basis for limited military incursions.”

On April 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin [stated](#) that although Russia prefers peace, [foreign adversaries](#) should not “cross the red line in respect to Russia,” or “Russia’s response will be asymmetrical, quick and tough.” On April 22, Defense Minister Shoigu [announced](#) that exercises were complete and most units would [return](#) to their permanent bases. Some units, however, would remain at the Pogonovo training range, outside of Voronezh, through the upcoming Zapad military exercises in September. As a result, significant Russian forces likely will remain close to the Ukrainian border for the near future, allowing Russia to threaten escalation through the summer.

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